

# Take a Stand Against Crime: Join a Neighborhood Watch

*Neighborhood Watch, Block Watch, Town Watch, Building Watch, Crime Watch—whatever the name, it's one of the most effective and least costly ways to prevent crime and reduce fear. Neighborhood Watch fights the isolation that crime both creates and feeds upon. It forges bonds among area residents, helps reduce burglaries and robberies, and improves relations between local law enforcement and the communities they serve.*

## WHY NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH?

§ It works. Throughout the country, dramatic decreases in burglary and related offenses are reported by law enforcement professionals in communities with active Watch programs.

§ Today's transient society produces communities that are less personal. Many families have two working parents and children involved in many activities that keep them away from home. An empty house in a neighborhood where none of the neighbors know the owner is a prime target for burglary.

§ Neighborhood Watch also helps build pride and serves as a springboard for efforts that address other community concerns, such as recreation for youth, child care and affordable housing.

## HOW DOES A NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH START?

A motivated individual, a few concerned residents, a community organization, or a law enforcement agency can spearhead the effort to establish a Watch. Together they can:

§ Organize a small planning committee of neighbors to discuss needs, the level of interest and possible community problems.

§ Contact the local police or sheriff's department, or local crime prevention organization, for help in training members in home security, developing reporting skills and obtaining information on local crime patterns.

§ Hold an initial meeting to gauge neighbors' interest; establish the purpose of the program; and begin to identify issues that need to be addressed.

- § Select a coordinator.
- § Ask for block captain volunteers who are responsible for relaying information to members.
- § Recruit members, keeping up-to-date information on new residents and making special efforts to involve the elderly, working parents and young people.
- § Work with local government or law enforcement to put up Neighborhood Watch signs, usually after at least 50 percent of all households are enrolled.

### **WHO CAN BE INVOLVED?**

Any community resident can join— young and old, single and married, renter and homeowner. Even the busiest of people can belong to a Neighborhood Watch—they too can keep an eye out for neighbors as they come and go.

### **I LIVE IN AN APARTMENT BUILDING. CAN I START A NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH?**

Yes. Watch Groups can be formed around any geographical unit: a block, apartment building, townhouse complex, park, business area, public housing complex, office building or marina.

### **WHAT DOES A NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH DO?**

A Neighborhood Watch consists of

neighbors helping neighbors. They are extra eyes and ears for reporting crime and helping neighbors. Members meet their neighbors, learn how to make their homes more secure, watch out for each other and the neighborhood, and report activity that raises their suspicions to the police or sheriff's office.

### **WHAT ARE THE MAJOR COMPONENTS OF A WATCH PROGRAM?**

§ Community meetings. These should be conducted on a regular basis, such as bi-monthly, monthly or six times a year.

§ Citizens' or community patrol. A citizens' patrol is made up of volunteers who walk or drive through the community and alert police to crime and questionable activities. Not all Neighborhood Watches need a citizens' patrol.

§ Communications. These can be as simple as a weekly flier posted on community announcement boards or as formal as a newsletter that updates neighbors on the progress of the program or a neighborhood electronic bulletin board.

§ Special events. These are crucial to keep the program going and growing. Host talks or seminars that focus on current issues, such as hate or bias-motivated violence, crime in schools, teenage alcohol and other drug abuse, or domestic violence. Adopt a park or school

playground and paint over graffiti. Sponsor a block party, holiday dinner, or recreational activity that will provide neighbors a chance to get to know each other.

§ Other aspects of community safety. For instance, start a block parent program to help children in emergency situations.

### **WHAT ARE MY RESPONSIBILITIES AS A WATCH MEMBER?**

§ Be alert!

§ Know your neighbors and watch out for each other.

§ Report suspicious activities and crimes to the police or sheriffs' department.

§ Learn how you can make yourself and your community safer.

### **WHAT KIND OF ACTIVITIES SHOULD I BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR AS A WATCH MEMBER?**

§ Someone screaming or shouting for help.

§ Someone looking in windows of houses and parked cars.

§ Property being taken out of houses where no one is at home or from closed businesses.

§ Cars, vans, or trucks moving slowly with no apparent destination or with lights turned off.

§ Anyone being forced into a vehicle.

§ A stranger sitting in a car or stopping to talk to a child.

Report these incidents to the police or sheriffs' department. Talk about concerns and problems with your neighbors.

### **HOW SHOULD I REPORT THESE INCIDENTS?**

§ Call 9-1-1 or your local emergency number.

§ Give your name and address.

§ Explain what happened.

§ Briefly describe the suspect: sex and race, age, height, weight, hair color, clothing, and distinctive characteristics, such as a beard, mustache, scars or an accent.

§ Describe the vehicle if one was involved: color, make, model, year, license plate, and special features, such as stickers.

# Starting a Neighborhood Watch

*Neighborhood Watch, Block Watch, Town Watch, Apartment Watch, Crime Watch – no matter what it's called, this is one of the most effective and least costly answers to crime. Watch groups are a foundation of community crime prevention. They can be a stepping stone to community revitalization.*

## Phase One: Getting Started -- Meetings, Block Captains, and Maps

§ Form a small planning committee of neighbors to discuss needs, the level of interest, possible challenges and the Watch concept.

§ Contact the local police or sheriffs' department, or local crime prevention organization, to discuss Neighborhood Watch and local crime problems. Invite a law enforcement officer to attend your meeting.

§ Publicize your meeting, at least one week in advance, with door-to-door fliers and follow up with phone calls the day before.

§ Select a meeting place that is accessible to people with disabilities.

§ Hold an initial meeting to gauge neighbors' interest, establish purpose of program, and begin to identify issues that need to be addressed. Stress that a Watch group is an association of neighbors who look out for each other's families and property, alert the police to any suspicious activities or crime in progress, and work together to make their community a safer and better place to live.

## Phase Two: When the neighborhood decides to adopt the Watch idea

Elect a chairperson.

§ Ask for block captain volunteers who are responsible for relaying information to members on their block, keeping up-to-date information on residents, and making special efforts to involve the elderly, working parents and young people. Block captains also can serve as liaisons between the neighborhood and the police, and they communicate information about meetings and crime incidents to all residents.

§ Establish a regular means of communicating with Watch members, e.g., newsletter, telephone tree, e-mail, fax, etc.

§ Prepare a neighborhood map showing names, addresses and phone numbers of participating households, and distribute it to members. Block captains keep this map up to date, contacting newcomers to the neighborhood and rechecking occasionally with ongoing participants.

§ With guidance from a law enforcement agency, the Watch trains its members in home security techniques, observation skills and crime reporting. Residents also learn about the types of crime that affect the area.

§ If you are ready to post Neighborhood Watch signs, check with law enforcement to see if they have such eligibility requirements, such as number of houses that participate in the program. Law enforcement may also be able to provide your program with signs. If not, they can probably tell you where you can order them.



§ Organizers and block captains must emphasize that Watch groups are not vigilantes and do not assume the role of the police. They only ask neighbors to be alert, observant and caring—and to report suspicious activity or crimes immediately to the police.

§ The Watch concept is adaptable. There are Park Watches, Apartment Watches, Window Watches, Boat Watches, School Watches, Realtor Watches, Utility Watches and Business Watches. A Watch can be organized around any geographic unit.

### **Tips for Success**

§ Hold regular meetings to help residents get to know each other and to collectively decide upon program strategies and activities.

§ Consider linking with an existing organization, such as a citizens' association, community development office, tenants' association or housing authority.

§ Canvas door-to-door to recruit members.

§ Involve everyone -- young and old, single and married, renter and homeowner.

§ Gain support from the police or sheriffs' office. This is critical to a Watch group's credibility. These agencies are the major sources of information on local crime patterns, home security, other crime prevention education and crime reporting.

§ Get the information out quickly. Share all kinds of news – dispel rumors.

§ Gather the facts about crime in your neighborhood. Check police reports, do victimization surveys, and learn residents' perceptions about crime. Often residents' opinions are not supported by facts, and accurate information can reduce fear of crime.

§ Physical conditions like abandoned cars or overgrown vacant lots contribute to crime. Sponsor cleanups, encourage residents to beautify the area, and ask them to turn on outdoor lights at night.

§ It's essential to celebrate the success of the effort and recognize volunteers' contributions through such events as awards, annual dinners and parties. To help meet community needs, Neighborhood Watches can sponsor meetings that address broader issues such as drug abuse, gangs, self-protection tactics, isolation of the elderly, crime in the schools and rape prevention.

§ Don't forget events, like National Night Out or a potluck dinner, that give neighbors a chance to get together. Such items as pins, t-shirts, hats or coffee mugs with the group's name also enhance identity and pride.